

# Using an Arabic Dictionary

2008 – By “The Middle Path”

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

## SECTION 1:

It may seem silly but Arabic dictionaries are very different from English ones and one would actually have to learn how to use an Arabic dictionary to be able to look up words effectively. So this would hopefully assist some people to be able to do this.

The following is all based on the Hans-Wehr dictionary.

Firstly, most words in Arabic are derived from a certain three-letter root.

- The first letter is called the faa-kalimah,
- the second the 'ain-kalimah and
- the third is named the laam-kalimah.

For teaching purposes, in order to explain various scales and forms of words, the commonly used word is “*Fa Aa La*” ( *faa-‘ain-laam*: فعل).

So when attempting to look up a word in a dictionary, you would not just go to the first letter of the word as you would in English, but you would first have to break up the word into its original three-letter form.

E.g. For finding the meaning of word *maf'ool*, you would not find this under the letter *meem*, but under the letter ‘*Fa*’, since the root letters of this word are ‘*Fa-Aa-La*’.

Before going further with discussion, let us keep the various forms of root “*Fa-Aa-La*” in front of us.

Verbal Noun مَصْدَرٌ	Passive participle اسْمُ الْمَفْعُولِ	Active participle اسْمُ الْفَاعِلِ	Present (& future) Tense مُضَارِعٌ	Past Tense مَاضِي	S. No.
فِعْلٌ	مَفْعُولٌ	فَاعِلٌ	يَفْعَلُ	فَعَلَ	1.
تَفْعِيلٌ	مُفَعَّلٌ	مُفْعِّلٌ	يُفَعِّلُ	فَعَّلَ	2.
مُفَاعَلَةٌ	مُفَاعِلٌ	مُفَاعِلٌ	يُفَاعِلُ	فَاعَلَ	3.
اِفْعَالٌ	مُفَعِّلٌ	مُفَعِّلٌ	يُفَعِّلُ	اَفْعَلَ	4.
تَفَعُّلٌ	مُتَفَعِّلٌ	مُتَفَعِّلٌ	يَتَفَعَّلُ	تَفَعَّلَ	5.
مُتَفَاعَلَةٌ	مُتَفَاعِلٌ	مُتَفَاعِلٌ	يَتَفَاعِلُ	تَفَاعَلَ	6.
اِنْفِعَالٌ	مُنْفَعِّلٌ	مُنْفَعِّلٌ	يُنْفَعِّلُ	اِنْفَعَلَ	7.
اِفْتِعَالٌ	مُفْتَعِّلٌ	مُفْتَعِّلٌ	يُفْتَعِّلُ	اِفْتَعَلَ	8.
اِفْعَالٌ	مُفْعِّلٌ	مُفْعِّلٌ	يَفْعَلُ	اَفْعَلَ	9.
اِسْتِفْعَالٌ	مُسْتَفَعِّلٌ	مُسْتَفَعِّلٌ	يَسْتَفَعِّلُ	اِسْتَفْعَلَ	10.

For the first form of verbs (Fa-Aa-La), the past tense has three different forms. The ‘ain-kalimah could either have a fatha (eg. nasara), kasrah (e.g. hasiba) or domma (eg. karuma).

The dictionary will transliterate the word next to the Arabic which tells you how to pronounce the word. The present tense is the same in that the ‘ain-kalimah could take either of the three harakaat.

The dictionary writes either an “a”, “i” or “u” next to the transliteration of the past tense verb. These words indicate what *harakaat* the ‘ain-kalimah

will have in the present tense: an “a” means fatha (eg. yaftahu), “i” kasrah (eg. yadriibu) and “u” domma (eg. yansuu).

After that the *masdar* of the word is mentioned in brackets. Thereafter, the various meanings of the verb are listed.

All Arabic verbs are either:

- masculine or feminine;
- first, second or third person; and
- singular, dual or plural.
- The verb will change slightly depending on which combination of these things it is. So for the past tense the verb could be any one of the following:
  - **fa’ala, fa’alaa, fa’aloo** (3rd person, male: single then dual then plural)
  - **fa’alat, fa’alataa, fa’alna** (3rd person, female: single then dual then plural)
  - **fa’alta, fa’latumaa, fa’altum** (2nd person, male: single then dual then plural)

- **fa'alti, fa'altumaa, fa'altunna** (2nd person, female: single then dual then plural)
- **fa'altu, fa'alnaa, fa'alnaa** (1st person: single then dual then plural)

So when looking up verbs you would have to recognise whether it is masculine or feminine; first, second or third person; and singular, dual or plural; since these things affect the meaning of the word.

You would also disregard any additions to the verb based on these things in order to arrive at the root letters. E.g. “dharab*tum*” – the ‘*tum*’ is additional (it indicates plurality; 2nd person). So the root letters are *daad-raa-baa*.

In the word “Shahid*naa*” – the ‘*naa*’ is extra (it shows plurality, first person). So the roots are *sheen-haa-daal*.

Let us take another example. In the word, “Jalasa*t*” – the *taa* is there to show that it is feminine so the root is *jeem-laam-seen*. And so on.

The same is for the present tense. The verb could be:

- **yaf'alu, yaf'alaani, yaf'aloona** (3rd person, male: single then dual then plural)
- **taf'alu, taf'alaani, yaf'alna** (3rd person, female: single then dual then plural)

- **taf'alu, taf'alaani, taf'aloona** (2nd person, male: single then dual then plural)
- **taf'aleena, taf'alaani, taf'alna** (2nd person, female: single then dual then plural)
- **af'alu, naf'alu, naf'alu** (1st person: single then dual then plural)

So to get to the root letters, you ignore any additions to the verb based on these things. In all cases the *yaa* or *taa* at the beginning of the verb must be dropped. Eg. “yaktub*aa*ni” – the *aani* shows that it is dual so the roots are *kaaf-taa-baa*. “Tashrabeena” the *eena* indicates that it is second person, female, so the root letters are *sheen-raa-baa*. “yahrimna” the *noon* is dropped (it indicates that the verb is feminine, plural) so the roots are *haa-raa-meem*.

Very often there are pronouns added to the verbs. In such cases the pronoun is the object of the verb and is not part of it. So these must be ignored when trying to determine what the root letters of the verb are.

These pronouns are:

- **ha, humaa, hum** (3rd person, male: single then dual then plural)
- **haa, humaa, hunna** (3rd person, female: single then dual then plural)

- **ka, kumaa, kum** (2nd person, male: single then dual then plural)
- **ki, kumaa, kunna** (2nd person, male: single then dual then plural)
- **(the letter) yaa, naa, naa** (1st person: single then dual then plural)

There are ten different forms of the verb (the above was only based on the first form.) Each form after the first one has certain letters added to the three-letter root. These ten forms are:

- **I fa'ala – yaf'alu**
- **II fa'3ala – yufa'3ilu** (tashdeed on the 'ain-kalimah)
- **III faa'ala – yufaa'ilu** (alif after the faa-kalimah)
- **IV af'ala – yuf'ilu** (hamza before the faa-kalimah)
- **V tafa'3ala – yatafa'3alu** (taa before the faa-kalimah, tashdeed on the 'ain-kalimah)
- **VI tafaa'ala – yatafaa'alu** (taa before the faa-kalimah, alif after it)
- **VII infaf'ala – yanfa'ilu** (hamza and noon before the faa-kalimah)
- **VIII ifta'ala – yafat'ilu** (hamza and taa before the faa-kalimah)
- **IX if'alla – yaf'allu** (hamza before the faa-kalimah, tashdeed on the laam-kalimah)

- **X istaf'ala – yastaf'ilu** (hamza, seen and taa before the faa–kalimah)

What is written in brackets shows what letters have been added to the original three-letter root in the various different forms. These additional letters must be dropped when looking up the verbs. Eg. “Istaghfara” is on the tenth form so the hamza seen and taa are dropped: the roots are *ghain-faa-raa*. “Yuqaatilu” – the yaa shows that it is present tense so that is ignored. This word is on the third form (the alif is extra) so the roots are *qaaf-taa-laam*. “Insarafa” – this is on the seventh form so the root letters are *saad-raa-faa*.

When looking up verbs the first form is given first, with all its meanings. Then after that there will be various Roman numerals, such as III, or IX or V. These numbers indicate which other forms of the verb the root letters can accommodate (not all words can take all of the ten forms) and the meanings of the verb in each of these forms.

There are additional forms over and above that of the ten mentioned here but these are rare and not used much. There are also certain verbs which have an original root of four letters and not three but these are also uncommon.

After the meanings of the verb are listed, and that of the different forms of the verb, all the nouns which can be derived from that verb are listed. Many of the words which begin with a meem – such as muhsin, mujaahid,



mu'allim etc. – are such nouns. So if you see words like this, drop the meem to get the root letters. So for these words given here, muhsin is from *haa-seen-noon*, mujaahid comes from *jeem-haa-daal* and mu'allim from *'ain-laam-meem*.

## SECTION 2:

In a previous section, some guidelines were given on how to effectively look up words using an Arabic dictionary. The focus here now is on what to do when looking up words which contain weak letters as this can sometimes prove problematic.

The difficulty that arises in using the dictionary is when weak letters (waw and yaa) are involved. Because they are weak letters they would often get changed to another letter or get dropped entirely and this could make it hard to determine what the actual original three-letter roots are.

Eg. the word صام. One might think that the root letters are *saad-alif-meem* since those are the only three letters visible but this is not the case. The roots are in fact *saad-waw-meem* but since waw is a weak letter and it would have had a harakah, it then gets changed to an alif.

The word ميزان. If you think to look for this word under *yaa-zaa-noon* then you would not find it. This is because this word is derived from the verb وزن. When it is put on the scale of mif'aa'l it becomes ميزان but since this would be really hard to pronounce it gets altered to ميزان.

The word نائم. Since this word is on the scale of faa'il it might be assumed that the roots are *noon-hamza-meem*. But it isn't so: the roots are *noon-*

*waw-meem*. When you put these letters on the scale of faa'il you get نـاوم.

Here the weak letter has a harakah so it gets changed to a hamza to make it easier to pronounce.

So if you are struggling to find the roots of a particular word then it is perhaps because there is a weak letter involved and it has been changed to something else. So see if a waw or yaa could fit in anywhere in the word. To know all of the changes which can take place one would have to study *i'laal* which is one of the topics covered by *sarf*.

But it is not only weak letters which can be changed, it can happen to others as well. This is called *ibdaal*.

Eg. the word ازدحم. This word is on the scale of ifta'ala (eighth form). Here the taa of ifta'ala has changed to a daal. So the roots would be *zaa-haa-meem*.

The word اصـطـير. It is the same as the word before except that the taa here has changed to a ط. So the roots are *saad-baa-raa*.

So in ibdaal, the taa of ifta'ala either changes to a daal or to a ط.

### SECTION 3:

The previous sections on this topic focused mostly on verbs. Here some basic guidelines on what to do when trying to figure out the root letters of nouns will be given.

1) In Arabic, words could be masculine or feminine. Usually a singular feminine word has a '*taa marbutah*' (ة) to indicate that it is feminine. So when determining the root letters, it is dropped.

Eg. معلمة

2) Words could also be dual or plural. If it is dual, then '*aani*' (آن) [or '*aini*' (ين)] would be added to the word; and if plural then '*oona*' (ون) [or '*eena*' (ين)] would be added. That is for masculine words. If feminine plural then '*aat*' (آت) would be added. So those letters have to be dropped to arrive at the root letters. This is disregarding broken plurals which do not follow any set pattern – they just have to be learned.

Eg. مسلمان | مسلمون | مسلمات

3) A lot of nouns start with the letter meem, and when this is so, then that ought to be dropped. (Note: this isn't always true!)

Eg. مكتب | مفتاح | محدث | محسن | ملعب

4) Usually you would drop the following letters in nouns: alif, waw and yaa

i.e. the madds or elongated vowels. The key word here is *usually*.

Eg. كاتب | عليم | شكور | مشاركة | لباس